

All applications won't be processed before early voting, but election commission has a plan

Katherine Burgess, Memphis Commercial Appeal Published 3:41 p.m. CT Oct. 16, 2018 | Updated 6:48 p.m. CT Oct. 16, 2018



(Photo: Brandon Dill / For CommercialAppeal.com)
CONNECTTWEETLINKEDINCOMMENTEMAILMORE

A surge in applications means not all voter applications in Shelby County will be processed by the time early voting starts, the Shelby County Election Commission said Tuesday.

However, the commission also announced a plan to ensure that people can vote even if their application hasn't been cleared by the time they reach the polls.

About 24,000 applications still need to be processed, most of which are questionable, said Genine Taylor, manager of voter and candidate services.

Likely 3,000 to 4,000 of those applications are new and complete, Taylor said.



Genine Taylor, manager of voter and candidate services, speaks to the media about a number of applications yet to be processed. (Photo: Katherine Burgess)

The Tennessee Black Voters Project, which the commission said submitted the majority of the incomplete applications, has filed a lawsuit against the commission.

"The SCEC's statement that over half of voter registration forms received are invalid and its refusal to timely release public records raises concerns about whether it is wrongly invalidating thousands of voter registration forms TNBVP submitted during a historic statewide drive," the project said in a release. "There are also concerns about whether affected Tennesseans are being notified of their right to 'cure'—or correct—deficient forms by or on Election Day so they can still vote a regular ballot in the upcoming election."

People who registered via paper application on the last day are advised to use early voting, said Linda Phillips, administrator of the election commission.

If a person's name is not registered to vote, a poll worker will then call a helpline, giving the election commission a chance to fill out missing information from that person's application and process it immediately. If that doesn't work, people may fill out provisional ballots.

The 9:01: [Will the Democratic 'blue wave' overflow Memphis suburbs?](#)

Missing information

On Tuesday, Taylor showed members of the media how they had created "problem piles" of applications missing information. One such application was missing both the first and last name. Another listed 201 Poplar as the person's address. Another was empty except for the signature. Employees are researching the questionable applications to fill out information and see which are valid. In many instances, letters sent to applicants have been returned, Taylor said.

"It just slows you up," Taylor said. "Maybe we can figure these out, but with so many you've got to make a choice."

In some instances, it appears that people have changed addresses or registered for others, said Robert Meyers, chairman of the commission. That information has been turned over to the Shelby County District Attorney General and the U.S. Attorney's Office.

"We don't know if there's anything nefarious, but there's enough to create a concern," Meyers said.

Employees have been working "night and day" to process the applications, Taylor said. A normal day is 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., but a second shift has been created from 4 p.m. to 11 p.m. Some first shift workers have been coming in at 6 or 7 a.m., she said.



July 17, 2014 - Election Commission employee Rick Kelly tests voting machines as preparations are underway for early voting to begin. (Photo: Mike Brown, Mike Brown)

'Chaos thrust upon us'

A majority of the "problem" applications with missing information came from the Tennessee Black Voters Project, Phillips said. Nearly 10,000 of the applications turned in on the final day of registration came from the organization, she said.

Phillips said she offered to buy the Tennessee Black Voters Project Wi-Fi enabled tablets, but was turned down.

"I asked them to give us the forms as soon as possible, and they dumped almost 10,000 forms on us in the last day," Phillips said. "It's not that we are creating chaos here, it's we're having chaos thrust upon us by other people. What we hope happens here is that people vote early so we can figure out who is real voters."

Tequila Johnson, statewide manager of the Tennessee Black Voters Project, said they didn't sit on applications only to turn them in on the last day, but that last-minute excitement about the election caused an increase of registrations immediately before the deadline. She also said that she had never heard from the Shelby County Election

Commission about an offer of tablets, but that she's reached out to them and not heard back.

Election 2018: [Charter amendment questions to remain on ballot, despite lawsuit claiming misleading wording](#)

The project, which had a goal of registering 55,000 voters across the state, worked with a variety of local organizations, including Rise Up North Memphis and Up the Vote 901. Those organizations included both paid employees and volunteers.

"The Tennessee Black Voters Project just wants to register people to vote," she said. "We want to make sure people are on the voter rolls. We want to work with the election commission to make sure any issues on the forms that are incomplete that we can rectify them."

Early voting is Oct. 17 until Nov. 1. The general election is Nov. 6.